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Book Review:

Comprehensive Study of Interethnic Relations in the Baltics

Jüri Ruus*

A Cat's Lick: Democratization and Minority Communities in the Post-Soviet Baltic by Timofei Agarin, 2010, Amsterdam, N.Y: Rodopi.

Timofei Agarin's book is an in-depth study of relations between ethnic groups in the Baltics.

The author has written a comparative case study of the three states, covering a vast array of questions and issues of interethnic relations, such as the historical legacy of the Baltics, state-building and framing non-titulars, minority cooptation and representation in political as well as social structures, educational and language policies. This is the first book that makes an attempt to compare ethnic minority communities in all three states.

Besides the famous Baltic political scientists (A.Lieuvén, R.Taagepera, A.Krupjavičius, others), the author refers to the works of many prominent social scientists: J. Linz, A.Stepan, L.Diamond, R.Dahl, D.Galbreath, S.Smootha, A.Przeworski, G.O'Donnell. The book is organized into nine chapters. The final two chapters tackle the complex issues of minority representation and their engagement in civic initiatives. One of the virtues of the book is its elaborate analysis of the various dimensions of interethnic relations. Agarin handles the massive literature and data existing about interethnic relations in the Baltic. *A Cat's Lick* is written in an emotional style, at the same time maintaining a discursive style of analysis. The book is convincingly argued, logically structured and organized, methodologically sophisticated and extremely well-informed. He demonstrates deep and detailed knowledge of not only minority issues but also transitional theory. Agarin combines his ambitious intellectual agenda to reach the broad audience of titular versus non-titular nations and diverse social layers. His analysis is certainly an important contribution to the discourse of transition theory within the context of democratisation.

In reflecting the legacies of the authoritarian past, Agarin's book addresses the role that non-titular nations have played in the process of liberalisation and democratisation, the relations between states and societies. Basically, the discussion proceeds along three lines: First, the book examines the issues of state-building and nation-building and their impact on democratization. The author indicated that the state and nation-building in these three countries has largely overlapped, being envisaged by majority populations without consultations with the local ethnic majorities (p.127). Second, it compares the impact of ethno-cultural diversity on the development of the Baltic nation-states. Third, the book addresses the questions of the participation of minority communities in the development, criticism and improvements of state institutions and policies since independence. Agarin's analysis points out that two decades after independence the post-communist states and societies are seen by many members of majority groups as serving primarily the interests of their ethnic community. In this situation, the members of non-titular communities need to adopt to the majority's perceptions in order to benefit from the achievements of democratisation. Agarin's discussion makes it clear that the structures of political communities were designed to suit the interests of titular nations and, therefore, resulted in the marginalisation of the minority communities. (see also Agarin 2010: 380)

However, the book 'suffers' from evident flaws that the author tends to repeat – pieces are sometimes overlapping, the style is emotional, and the theoretical conceptions are superficially argued. Methodologically the book is rather blurred. It aims to cover very many societal aspects,

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however, this results in a relatively superficial analysis of the issues. The author mainly uses qualitative discursive historical analysis, not paying much attention to the quantitative side. The descriptive discourse analysis frequently contains a simple sequence of facts, which undoubtedly undermines the quality of the book. Agarin's deductive approach suggests that most suitable facts are picked up just to fit to one or another discursive framework. Many prominent social scientists, who specifically focus on interethnic issues (J. Rex, J. Berry and others), and their conceptions are not examined in the book.

The presented research fits into the regional study, although the author makes some comparisons and draws parallels with other European states. The research has highlighted some of the controversial social and political developments after collapse of communism. Agarin raises the fundamental critical question of whether a democracy based on liberal rights can really deal with the complexities of real life. As the author puts it, "critical research needs to clarify the reasons why the post-Soviet Baltic states are considered to be democratic despite omnipresent deficiencies" (p.6).

Certainly, the Baltic countries are on the boundary between two civilizations – the East and the West. Analytically and taxonomically it is relatively easy to convince the reader that the three states are facing democratic deficiencies while these countries do not belong to the first world or among established democracies yet. It would probably be naive to think that the legacy of a totalitarian past has vanished in just twenty years after regaining independence. Many people have been socialised most of their life in communist times, when the wish for a 'strong hand', the hegemony of one nation, hierarchy and rigid subordination was (and partly still is) rooted in their mindsets. Agarin cursorily admits these points on p.326.

However, democracy and democratisation in a broader sense are on-going processes in many states, and regardless of their liberal nature, one should be very much afraid when they stop. Understandably, in transitional theory the author did not use the concept of consolidated democracy as long as the latter is viable when democracy is the 'only game in the town'.

Agarin is certainly right; indeed, international conditionality influences the general attitudes of the elites towards minority integration. The Baltic states have been members of the EU and NATO for already seven years. However, most of the criticism comes from the Russian side. The critics from international organisations, such as the OSCE and others, have been relatively modest and have mainly touched upon the educational and language policy. In other words, the Baltic states comply with the ethnic minority norms of the international community.

Agarin is right when he sees the great democratic potential of minorities for the advancement of democracy. I agree that the titulars have by far not used the non-titulars' social capital and, in this respect, substantial improvement can be made. In order to use this potential, both majority and minority groups should be in a dialogue and make compromises.

The book argues that the design of political institutions is crucial for successful democratisation. However, besides institutional structures and their maturity, there seem to be other factors that affect the success of democratisation: political culture, the necessity to have liberal orientations widely spread among people, individuals' perceptions and stereotypes, mentalities.

One of democracy's defining characteristics is that ethnic minorities as any other social category do not constitute a monolithic, ideologically united group, but instead are plural and partly autonomous from each other with different interests. Obviously, the minority communities consist of different social layers and categories. This point is frequently neglected by the author.

A modest non-involvement in the Baltic independence struggle as well as state-building are factors that the author continuously explains by pointing to the limited

opportunities available to non-titular groups to participate in political decision-making. As the Baltic states are basically democracies, then what kind of legal constraints, as the author claims, are placed on the members of minority communities remains unclear (p.275). By taking into account the state, initially even restrictive citizenship policy, the point made by Agarin sounds pretty 'narrow', the Baltic revolutions and the 'doors' of state-building were opened (and still are) for all social layers

irrespective of which nationality they hold. On the other hand, legal state regulations and decisions are hardly capable of changing hidden perceptions, feelings of historical grievances, stereotypes of titular nations and ethnic minorities.

I disagree with the author's claim that only a small part of the minority communities are represented among political and social elites (p.281). I agree with Agarín that among top political elites the representativity of ethnic minorities leaves a lot to be desired, that the Russian speakers have not been represented in the Baltic parliaments and governments proportionally to their size, but on the other hand, the minority representativeness is pretty high on the local level and in municipalities. Just to remind the author that in Riga and Tallinn city councils, the configuration of non-core ethnics comprises close to fifty percent.

Agarín admits the standpoint common to many political theorists, which could be summarized as the stronger the civil society, the better off the quality of democracy is. Indeed, Agarín is right in claiming that public engagement in political decision-making represents an essential mechanism for continuous democratisation (p.21-28). That is why the author's special attention to civil society in the Baltics is justified. Minority-led initiatives and proposals are not taken into account in decision-making (p.319), etc. However, the problems of civil society, for instance, in Estonia and elsewhere in the Baltics are much deeper than the author sees. While Agarín is talking about non-inclusiveness and the lack of policy response to the issues of relevance for minority groups in the region, he is neglecting the notion that unresponsiveness of civil society groups does exist among core-nationals as well (p.305, 319).

How could the author blame the majorities for the lack of political will to accommodate the claims advanced in the civic networks of the minority members of Baltic societies, when in reality minority groups express their interests relatively rarely and not actively (p.311).

Agarín is certainly right when he stresses the impact of the historical legacies on current inter-ethnic relations between majorities and minorities. However, in elaborating these points his analysis seems to be shallow. The author explains the Baltic states' non-violent regime change and a relatively peaceful interethnic development (the tensions never mounted to violent conflicts in the Baltic societies (p.324) between two communities by citing the presence of a tacit agreement of ethnic minorities, a mindset inherited from Soviet times. Agarín is trying to draw direct parallels between the actions of the core national elite and minorities with the Soviet legacies in the past (p.326). In doing so, the author is forgetting that the political elite's configuration has been substantially altered during the last two decades. At the beginning of transition, indeed, the communist continuity was great among the political elite, especially in the 1990s; however, the last decade has witnessed fundamental changes in the political elite configurations in all three states.

Blaming new majorities is always the easy way to gain distance from the essence of the problems. More importantly, the author should have analysed more in depth how the former ruling majority all of a sudden became a minority. It would be naive to think that the concept of the 'elder brother of all the Soviet nations' heavily propagated in Stalinist and Brezhnevite times has lost its impact among Russians after the regime change. Psychologically it must have been pretty hard (adaptation) and unacceptable for many Russians. Furthermore, even today the interethnic relations 'suffer' from this kind of pro-Soviet mindset. In other words, twenty years after the regime change many Russian speakers are not used to holding a minority status, in particular the elderly people. One should not 'blame' as the author does only the national political elite for being largely 'guilty' of the marginalisation of minorities. The weakness of the ethnicities in the Baltics is clearly associated with the lack of unity, the absence of recognised non-titular political leaders, who would potentially lead diverse minority groups to stand actively for their rights. Generally speaking, the Russian-speaking political elite in the Baltics is still just beginning to develop and is quite flimsy. The author should have contemplated these points as well.

I also disagree with the following statements: “Russian speakers lost interest in the fate of Soviet state that visibly contributed in its desintegration” (p.38); “Many of the non-titular immigrants in the Baltics were alienated from general line of the CPSU?” (p.54); “the Russian-speaking minority was systematically discouraged to participate in political decision-making” (p.59).

However, the fact is that no influential and organised dissents of non-titulars existed in Soviet times in the Baltics. Half of the Communist party members came from non-titular nationalities, although the number differs across the three states. They were people who worked mostly in all-union factories and belonged to the proletariat. The latter social category, due to the quota system, had an advantage of being accepted into the ranks of the Communist party. This particular layer was the main instrument in implementing the Communist party line in the Baltics. The majority of the key social positions both in the Communist party hierarchy and Soviet state structures were occupied by either ethnic Balts, who had been raised and Russified in remote areas of the Soviet Union (some of them hardly spoke any of the local language) or by non-titulars who were directly sent to the republics by Moscow. The deputy secretary of the Republican Communist Party was a position specifically created in order to secure and balance the Communist party line in places, etc. Therefore, I disagree when the author writes that “A significant part of the Russian-speaking residents of the Baltic Republics had actively supported the separation of their republics from the USSR in the second half of the 1980s” (p.70). The argument that only 20-30 percent of non-titulars were engaged directly in the anti-independence Interfront movement does not necessarily mean that the rest of the non-indigenous population actively supported Baltic independence. Admittedly, some of the minority representatives were actively engaged in the struggle for Baltic independence, however, it was rather a ‘wait and see’ mentality that prevailed. During that time, many popular forces (incl. core-nationals) did not dare to voice their genuine aims to separate from the USSR due to the uncertainty of the political situation.

One may assume that in ethnically split societies like Latvia and Estonia, where state and nation-building processes were closely related to achieving indigenous control over political institutions, the questions of interethnic relations would be much different from more ethnically homogenous societies like Lithuania. Indeed, the author is right in stating that “ethnic issues to be taken seriously” are largely absent in Lithuania. According to this logic, one may expect the national consensus policy, the ethnic representation, the level of civil society, and hence the quality of democracy to be at a much higher level in Lithuania compared to Estonia and Latvia. However, this is largely not the case.

Chapter seven addresses the question of how structural constraints imposed by the language legislation conditions differ according to the opinions of different ethnic communities. The proficiency in the state language is taken as an indicator for persisting social inequalities across the region? Even if we assume that minorities are speaking the state language fluently, I agree, it clearly contributes towards integration. However, it is not only the language ability that matters. Obviously, any advanced state in the world requires the knowledge of their official language as the prerequisite to applying for citizenship, and it is taken as an advantage in proceeding up the career ladder. The good language ability of an individual is not a criterion for being loyal to the state, just the same as poor language skills are not necessarily the criterion for individuals’ alienation, as the author claims. The latter is a much more complex phenomenon.

If the book explores the role played by the Russian speakers throughout recent history, then analysing one or another social process, parallels, and hints to titular nations are inevitable. However, these kind of comparisons are hardly attainable throughout the book.

The book is written from the angle of minority concerns and problems. It makes little or no effort to understand, analyse (not to say justify) the political behavior of the core majority political elites. Everything the political national elites are doing is almost completely negative and worthy of criticism. Such kind of ‘denial’ is derived from the non-inclusion of minorities in the political processes and

the reluctance to accept minority opinions and expressions by the elites. However, black and white discourse schemes (by the way, so common to Stalinist and Soviet times) are not the best guides to leading the reader towards objectivity.

Generally speaking, it seems that the author is trying in any case (or at all costs) to raise the role and place the non-titulars played in regaining Baltic independence and further on in state-building. However, one should not forget that in a multiethnic Europe the problems of minorities are acute everywhere, and the Baltic states are no exception in this respect. In other words, the marginalisation of ethnic minorities is not just a 'fashionable' concept peculiar to the Baltic states, but common to many states all over the world. Whether Western states are paying much more attention to overcoming alienation and marginalisation of this kind, remains to be seen.

As a matter of fact, as many of us know, a cat usually licks several times, not just once and for all.

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